The celestial city brought down to earth: Dmitry Tcherniakov's interpretation of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Invisible city of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya*

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The great cultural flowering of *fin de siècle* Russia has been justifiably termed a Silver Age. Why a Silver and not a Golden Age? From the perspective of literature, the period may have lacked writers of the stature of Pushkin, Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky. From the broader perspective of the cultural field in its entirety, however, the Silver Age had no rival in any period of Russian cultural history. It has been compared to the great flowerings of Periclean Athens and Renaissance England.[1] All artistic disciplines flourished; painting, sculpture, architecture, design, as well as literature, theater, dance and music. The Silver Age was also a period *par excellence* in which the artists, scientists, and scholars consciously endeavored to dispel all shadows of provincialism. Artists did not necessarily abandon their specifically Russian subject matter or stylistic peculiarities. On the contrary, they reveled in their world filled with the heroes of Russian legends, ethnographic customs and virtuosic folk ornamentation. However, they chose to incorporate these themes into cosmopolitan trends, such as *l'art pour l'art* aestheticism or symbolism. These cosmopolitan developments offered Russian artists new ways to incorporate Russian material into an international field of reference. Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's penultimate opera, *The legend of the invisible city of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya* counts among the most precious manifestations of this development.

Rimsky-Korsakov composed *The legend of the invisible city of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya* in 1903-1904 after several unsuccessful attempts to shed his folkloristic and nationalistic profile. With *Kitezh*, he returned to Russian subject matter, but with a difference. His new cosmopolitan ambitions offered him fresh perspectives on a better way of aligning his Russian style with larger or more global European developments.
The content of the opera is based on two principal sources: the chronicle of Kitezh (1223) and the sixteenth century hagiography of Fevroniya of Murom (canonized as a saint of the orthodox church in 1547). The first source narrates the battles between

Russians and Mongols (Tatars) around Lake *Svetlïy Yar*. The city of Kitezh was saved because the thick woods that surrounded it kept it hidden from the plundering Tatars. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the story received a spiritual twist. It was adapted into a miraculous tale of a miracle, where God saves Great Kitezh by making it invisible. Behind the story lurks the spiritual outlook of the Old Believers. These opponents to the church reforms of the 17th century projected the fate of the reformed orthodox onto the sorry end of Lesser Kitezh. That city was destroyed, because its citizens had excluded themselves from communion with God. The city of Greater Kitezh, however, represented the community of the Old Believers. God made their city invisible to earthly eyes, which are unable to see the reality of God's kingdom.

The second source recounts the life of Fevroniya of Murom. The author was a monk from the Kremlin, identified as Ermolai Erazm. Prince Peter, the ruler of Murom, is wounded by a snake and saved by Fevroniya, a villager with healing powers. Peter agrees to marry her, but the boyars of Murom are unwilling to accept a woman of lower birth as their princess. Fevroniya is forced into exile in a forest. Peter joins her. In their absence, city life deteriorates to such a degree, that the boyars send for the couple to return. As rulers, Peter and Fevroniya distinguish themselves through their profound piety and innumerable acts of mercy.

Vladimir Belsky, the librettist of the opera, combined the two story lines into the following plot:

Prelude: In Praise of the Wilderness
Act I: In the woods behind the Wolga: Fevroniya lives in the wilderness with her brother, a beekeeper. She feels herself in harmony with nature. Prince Vsevolod, the son of the ruler of Greater Kitezh, becomes lost during a hunt and discovers her dwelling place. A bear had injured his arm, but Fevroniya knows to treat the wound. He is struck by her beauty, but also by her way of life and beliefs. He asks her to marry him. She consents, not knowing who he is. His identity is revealed when the prince is already gone. The hunting party searches for him. They meet Fevroniya and reveal the prince's name.

Act II: *Lesser Kitezh:* The crowd awaits the wedding cortège of the new princess. Two rich citizens persuade a drunkard, Grishka Kuterma, to insult the girl of low birth. When the bridal party enters, Grishka mocks Fevroniya, but she shows herself generous and forgiving. The citizens start a wedding song, when all of a sudden the town is invaded by the plundering Tatars. They force Grishka to disclose the route to Greater Kitezh. Fevroniya is taken captive for her beauty. Fevroniya prays to God to make the city invisible.

Act III/1: *Greater Kitezh:* The people of Greater Kitezh learn of the disaster of Lesser Kitezh. The boyar Poyarok, who had brought the bride to the city, has been blinded and sent as a messenger. He reports that Grishka has disclosed the way and spreads the rumor that Fevroniya herself leads the enemy to the gates. Prince Yuri knows that the end is near and asks his people to pray for a miracle. Prince Vsevolod leads the men into battle. The women and the old prince stay behind and prepare to die. A page stands watch on the tower. He sees a golden mist that descends over the city.

Symphonic interlude: instrumental depiction of the battle of Kerzhenets, in which the Tatars defeat the Russians.

2: *The banks of lake Svetlïy Yar.* Grishka has brought the Tatars to the lake. As they sleep, Fevroniya frees Grishka. He tells her, however, that her life no longer counts for anything, because he had spread the rumor or he has slandered her. Suddenly, he discovers that the city has disappeared. His cries awaken the Tatars, who also witness the miracle that has been performed. The city of Greater Kitezh has disappeared from the earth, leaving only its reflection visible on the surface of the lake. The Tatars take fright and flee.

Act IV/1: *A dark night*: Fevroniya and Grishka run through the forest. They are exhausted. Grishka is plagued by the sound of bells ringing in his head and by a vision of the devil. Fevroniya tries to comfort him and teaches him pray to the earth. The bells ringing inside his head drive him made. He runs off and Fevroniya remains alone. The landscape is transformed. The mythical birds Alkonost and Sirin address her. The first

announces her death, the second the arrival of her groom and eternal life. The prince appears and leads her to the invisible city.

2: *Greater Kitezh, miraculously transformed*: Fevroniya is welcomed in the invisible city. The people of Kitezh continue the wedding song that had been interrupted by the attack of the Tatars. Fevroniya is happy, but remembers the sad fate of Grishka, whom she had to leave behind in the forest. She dictates a letter of comfort to him. Fevroniya and Vsevolod enter the cathedral for their wedding vows.

This summary gives only the rough outline of the drama. The text is saturated with references to several literary precedents. In his pioneering study on Russian symbolist opera, Simon Morrison lists them: *Radiant Lake: A Diary* by Zinaïda Hippius, *In the Woods* by Melnikov-Pechersky, *In Deserted Places* by Vladimir Korolenko and *Wanderer* by Apollon Maykov.[2]

Updating a symbolist relic

The outline of the plot immediately reveals the degree of challenge faced by a stage director, who has the intention to convey the content of the opera to a contemporary audience. The undisguised eschatology of the ending is hard to take seriously in our secularized times. When the opera is produced as it was conceived, with all the folkloristic, ethnographic and ritualistic trappings in place, the performance risks becoming little more than a charming stylistic study in Russian folk art and orthodox ritual. Such a performance may have its merits, but contemporary opera practice has other priorities. Over the course of the past decades, opera production has developed into a highly interpretative discipline, especially on European stages. The operatic repertoire is continuously explored as a means to deal with contemporary experiences and anxieties.

The production discussed here was presented on the stage of the Amsterdam *Music Theater* in 2012. The international reputation of the National Opera in Amsterdam rests firmly on a consistent policy of radical and innovative stage interpretations.[3]

Consequently, the production of Rimsky-Korsakov's Kitezh on the Amsterdam stage had to be more than an exercise in Russian ethnography.

The National Opera entrusted the task of updating *Kitezh* to the Russian opera director Dmitry Tcherniakov. The production that premiered on 8 February 2012 was not the first take of Tcherniakov on *The Legend*. He had staged a first version at the *Mariyinsky Theater* in St.Petersburg in 2002. He did not choose to repeat himself, however, and produced a new staging. Marc Albrecht conducted the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra and an exquisite cast including Svetlana Ignatovich as Fevroniya, John Daszak as Grishka and Maxim Aksenov as Prince Vsevolod. Dmitry Tcherniakov was hired for the direction and the costumes, the latter with the assistance of Elena Zaytseva. Gleb Filshtinsky designed the lighting. Besides the Amsterdam *Music Theater*, the production has been presented on the stages of the *Opéra Bastille* in Paris, the *Gran Teatre del Lice*u in Barcelona and the *Teatro alla Scala* in Milan. It has been documented in a recording on dvd.[4]

The challenge of modernizing or to contemporize the content of an opera like *Kitezh* is no trivial matter. The same could be said off all products of Russia's symbolist age. Especially the art works of the mystic symbolists are especially hard to adapt to contemporary expectations. Currently, music critics have reached a consensus to regard *The Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya* as a musical masterpiece of Russian symbolism.. This conclusion is somewhat antithetical, because this symbolism was unintended by Rimsky-Korsakov. He had no desire to contribute to a cultural fashion, for which he had no sympathy. Rather, it was Vladimir Belsky, the writer of the libretto, who cherished symbolist ambitions. Rimsky-Korsakov collaborated actively on the project, but he kept Belsky's eschatological dreams in check.

As Simon Morrison has argued, symbolist opera could not be consciously designed: *"a symbolist opera can only arise by default out of its reception."* [5] The reason for the failure of most symbolist operas was the extreme idealism, with which the symbolists regarded the art of music. In western thinking, the art of tones as a revelation of a higher, metaphysical truth has a long philosophical tradition and goes back to the times when Pythagoras and Plato coined the concept of the harmony of the spheres. The Russian symbolists promoted this idea to its extreme. Music had to be no less than a revelation of

the *noumenal*. Confronted with such a responsibility, composers could only fail. It remains relatively easy to imagine celestial music in literary terms. To turn this ambition to reality is another matter. Faced with such high expectations – comparable to the ones expressed in the unheard melodies of John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* - actual music can only disappoint. Consequently, conscious symbolist operas either seemed pallid or impossible to write.

Claude Debussy, the composer of the western symbolist masterpiece, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, realized all too well what was at stake. He succeeded where others failed because he was able to keep a safe measure of critical distance from his material. His sober attitude is wonderfully revealed in a quote from a letter to Ernest Chausson, where he alludes to the otherworldly character of the old king Arkel: *"He comes from beyond the grave, and he has that objective, prophetic gentleness of those who are soon to die – all of which must be expressed with* do, ré, mi, fa, sol, la, si, do!!! What a job!"[6]

Likewise, Rimsky-Korsakov succeeded to make his opera a success because he approached its composition in his usual no nonsense spirit. Since he did not share his librettist's eschatological dreams (expressed in the form of a liturgical opera) he was able to balance the project with more earth-bound accents. He explained his working method in a letter to Yevgeny Petrovsky: *I submit that in several scenes in the* Legend of the Invisible City etc. *I will be even closer to this archetype* (of a liturgical opera), *though somewhat deviating from it toward realism, as I think should always be the case. They (these scenes) will give life and diversity to the liturgical form. Without them the form might easily descend into the monotony and stiffness of the church liturgy."*[7]

As an atheist, Rimsky-Korsakov was the most unlikely candidate to compose an opera promising salvation in the afterlife. His interest in Russian orthodox ceremonies was mainly cultural and ethnographical. He possessed certain spiritual sympathies, however, but they were pantheistic rather than Christian. In his former dealings with Russian folkloristic material in opera's like *Christmas Eve* or *The Snow Maiden*, he found ways to explore his pantheistic interests. Russian legends or customs are often revealing of the so-called *dvoyeveriye***:** the presence of ancient, pagan nature worship behind the veil of Christian rituals. Also in *Kitezh*, he had ample opportunity to convey his interest in pantheism. The spirituality of the operatic Fevroniya is deeply pantheistic. She

encounters God in nature. She experiences the forest as a temple to the divine. She prays to Mother Earth as well as to the heavenly Father.

Rimsky-Korsakov balanced Belsky's plans with a fair dose of realism. His portrayal of city life in the second act could draw from many antecedents in former works of his own (*Pskovityanka*), of the great pioneer of Russian opera Alexander Serov (*The power of the Fiend*) and of Musorgsky in *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina*. The portrayal of the villain Grishka Kuterma is a virtuosic extension of Serov's and Musorgsky's realist manner. The character surpasses even the usual villains in Rimsky-Korsakov's former operas. Grishka is modelled on Dostoyevskian prototypes, such as Smerdyakov in *The brothers Karamazov*. Fevroniya's attitude towards Grishka also has Dostoyevskian overtones, i.e insisting as she does that every soul, however depraved, contains a sparkle of the divine. Grishka offers a dramatically effective contrast to the benign gentleness of Fevroniya. He puts her altruism severely to the test, but he does not succeed in unsettling her convictions, her kindness, and her empathy.

Universalizing Russian art

A thorough secularization of the story is already a challenge. The liberation of the visual imagery from its folkloristic trappings is a second challenge for a stage director. At first sight, Tcherniakov's staging departs from the ethnographic exuberance of the original. Nevertheless, Tcherniakov's attempt to universalize *Kitezh* resonates with Rimsky-Korsakov's own ambitions to transcend the confines of the Russian national school he had, almost single-handedly, developed, consolidated and propagated.[8] It is fair to say that without Rimsky-Korsakov, a Russian national school of composition would not have existed in the nineteenth century. All other composers involved in the process, e.g. Borodin or Musorgsky, left little performable output behind. Besides *Boris Godunov*, all major Russian operas were left incomplete at the time of the composer's death. They needed the hand of a skilled master to bring them to the stage.

Only Rimsky-Korsakov proved himself up for the task. He had the Russian style at his fingertips, but decided nevertheless to escape its confines and enlarge his outlook. He experimented with operas on non-Russian subjects (*Servilia,* set in Ancient Rome), or on international models (*The Tsar's Bride*), or international composers (*Pan Voyevoda*, with

references to Wagner and to Chopin). With *Kitezh*, he returned to Russian subject matter and the well-tested Russian musical style, but with his new experiences in mind.

In many respects, *Kitezh* is a retrospective work. Many scenes have prototypes in former Russian operas. To name but the most obvious, the representation of the Old Believers' spirituality resonates with Musorgsky's impressive portrait of an Old Believer community in *Khovanshchina*. Rimsky-Korsakov knew that opera intimately, because he had to bang his head against a wall for its completion.

Nevertheless, western models play a significant a part in *Kitezh* as Russian ones. The opera usually goes by the name of the Russian *Parsifal*. Rimsky-Korsakov did not conceal his reliance on that famous model. The score offers parallels to the most defining moments in Wagner's prototype, such as the ritualistic character of the scenes at the Grail Castle and at the city of Great Kitezh, the use of the *Verwandlungsmusik,* Wagner's famous orchestral interlude that paints the journey from the woods to the inner sanctuary, where "time becomes space." Or consider the parallelism between the pantheistic enchantment of nature in the fourth act of *Kitezh* and Wagner's *Good Friday Spell.* The ritual of the Eucharist is present in *Parsifal*'s temple scene, but also in the scene of the spiritual *rite de passage* that prepares the souls of Fevroniya and Vsevelod for their entrance in the transfigured city. Rimsky-Korsakov designed an orthodox sounding parallel to the motive of the *Dresden Amen* that represents faith in *Parsifal.* Above all, both operas contain glorious bell ringing. Russian composers had turned an imitation of orthodox bell ringing into a powerful musical symbol of Russianness. Significantly, Rimsky-Korsakov did not follow the tried and true formulas, made famous by Musorgsky in the Coronation Scene of *Boris Godunov*. Instead, he used international models: Wagner's bell ringing in *Parsifal,* but also the light bells of Franz Liszt's exquisite musical picture after Raphael's painting of the *Marriage of the Virgin* (*Sposalizio*). The move is significant. Marina Frolova-Walker has convincingly argued that Rimsky-Korsakov bade farewell to the Russian style in one of its most defining sonorous symbols: *"And so the Cathedral of the Assumption in the old Russian city is given the sound of Western bells as filtered through the minds of Liszt and Wagner. Rimsky-Korsakov had not forgotten the sound of Orthodox bells. He had not forgotten how to represent Orthodox bells orchestrally – he was, after all, the supreme exponent of the Russian style. Rather, he had simply lost interest in maintaining the Russian style, and since this was the first*

opportunity to represent bells since his abandonment of nationalism, a Lisztian or Wagnerian representation offered a refreshing change, and better reflected his current musical predilections."[9]

The utilization of *Parsifal* as a model reveals similarities, as well as differences, between the two works. The most obvious difference is the reversal of gender relations. In *Parsifa*l, man is the redeemer, woman – Kundry - the sinner. In *Kitezh*, it is the other way round. Both Parsifal and Fevroniya are children of the wilderness. Fevroniya became wise through her close contact with nature. Parsifal's exposure to nature did not make him wise. It preserved his character unspoiled, but in the guise of an unspoiled fool. He becomes wise through exposure to human suffering. Parsifal succeeds in redeeming Kundry from her sins, while Fevroniya is not able to save Grishka. The result of her ultimate attempt towards his salvation by sending him a letter from her heavenly abode remains unclear.

In Wagner's misogynistic universe, Kundry represents the eternal feminine in her continuous fall from grace. The female protagonist is represented as unable to save herself. Fevroniya symbolizes the Divine Sophia, the eternal feminine as personification of divine wisdom in the philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov, the philosopher who inspired the mystic symbolists. Fevroniya has all the appearance of a passive victim typical of traditional fairytales. A male hunter finds her defenseless in the woods and makes her his bride. As a character, however, she defies stereotypes. She does not simply await her fate, but is spiritually active. As an ethical and spiritual model, it is she who convinces prince Vsevolod of the value of her way of life, influencing him to follow her example.

The art of framing

Dmitry Tcherniakov belongs to the contemporary generation of opera directors who do not accept a work at face value. Tcherniakov is known for the elaborate detours he employs to arrive at a work's inner essence. In his Amsterdam production of *Kitezh,* Tcherniakov radically distances his interpretation from the opera's eschatological message. It does not mean, however, that he would treat the spiritual features condescendingly. On the contrary, his staging displays a delicate and sensitive probing of

the work's spiritual tone. He achieves this remarkable result through the quality of his character development on the one hand, but also through a carefully designed dramaturgical plan on the other. In his interpretative approach, one technique stands out: the technique of framing. In order retell the story in more contemporary terms he presents it within a specific framework. The audience is invited to see the drama and to hear the music from within a specified perspective. At the beginning of the performance, Tcherniakov communicates that perspective? to the audience. The technique of framing alienates the audience from a direct, unmediated experience of the opera's words and music. It leads perception along an imposed direction. Thus the music will be perceived within a clearly defined narrative that transcends the boundaries of the work. Tcherniakov uses this technique for only two acts only. From the third act onwards, framing is no longer necessary ., as this perspective of the events has been established firmly.

Tcherniakov's frames the opera's events in this way:

Life can never again be as it was, after what happened on Earth.
All live in expectation of inevitable death and the end of all things;
they try to discover how and where they will use the time left to them.
Fevroniya leaves to dwell in the forest.[10]

With this framework, Tcherniakov does not deviate far from the narrative of the work. The idea of the apocalypse is certainly present in Rimsky-Korsakov's opera. It was precisely the feature of the work that appealed so strongly to the symbolists. In the opera's narrative, the Russian victims experience the invasion of the Tatars as an apocalyptic moment. The Tatars are not actually represented as a historical reality, but rather as a demonic presence. They appear all of a sudden, as if out of nowhere. Mother Earth has opened herself and released a hostile power. The citizens of Greater Kitezh take the Tatars for an apocalyptic force, released by God as a punishment for their sins. In the opera's plot, the apocalyptic moment of destruction leads to transcendence in an eschatological sense. Life is transformed into a higher plane of existence.
In Tcherniakov's vision, however, the apocalypse has taken place before the events displayed in the opera. The nature of that apocalyptic moment remains unspecified.

Unnamed events have brought a definitive change to life on earth. People are conscious of life's inescapable ending. These events may have been anything., i.e. climatic calamities, perhaps? This explanation would link Tcherniakov's apocalypse to contemporary anxieties. In any case, an eschatological promise is not in sight. Earthly life will perish. The promise of eternal life is represented as a dream cherished by only some of the characters. Their reliance on faith in the resurrection after death is represented as one of the many possible reactions in the face of the inescapable.

Tcherniakov projects four different reactions onto the opera's characters. Fevroniya represents the first: unconditional altruism. In Tcherniakov's summary of the plot, Fevroniya is portrayed as a woman who has given up her former life in order to devote herself to helping those who cannot help themselves. She finds the spiritual energy needed for such a task in nature. She creates an alternative to normal human life. Prince Vsevolod experiences her example and ideas as a completely new vision on the world.

Tcherniakov frames the second act in these terms:

An impending threat splits the people into different groups, each of which finds its own way of surviving. Many choose to pretend that nothing has happened. Some decide that now all is permitted, to rob, to kill.[11]

Act II represents two other ways to respond to the situation. The second reaction is idleness: living a life of pleasure and idle pastime. This reaction is projected onto the citizens of Lesser Kitezh.

A third reaction is represented by the Tatars. They are not to be understood as a specific ethnic group. Like the citizens of Lesser Kitezh, they are men from different backgrounds who have lost the way to lead a meaningful life. Instead of idle pastime, they resort to violence. The Tatars are represented as people who have left all morality behind. They are profoundly nihilistic and live by the creed that nothing matters anymore. Everything is permitted. They know no moral obstruction preventing them from doing whatever they fancy, including robbery and murder.

The fourth reaction is projected onto the citizens of Greater Kitezh. These are the people that search for spiritual comfort under the guidance of a spiritual leader. Their portrayal

comes close to that of a sect that commits suicide on the order of their founder. Although their action of collective suicide resonates with the historical self-immolation of many Old Believers' communities, the reference to sectarian life does not stop there. The citizens of Greater Kitezh stand for those who cannot find spiritual strength on their own. They rely in a leader to guide them. Tcherniakov describes them in this way: *"the citizens are downcast, including Prince Yuri, who had created Kitezh as a shelter from earthly sufferings and as a place of spiritual renunciation. The people who had once followed him to this place are now at a loss. But there is nothing to count on but him."*[12]

This new framework enabled Tcherniakov to liberate the imagery of the opera from all traces of Russian folklore. His staging does not show church cupolas or historical costumes. Neither the Russian citizens, nor the Tatars are depicted historically. The characters are symbolic of a state of mind, not for an ethnic group. Even the stereotypical characterist types,such asthe people in the second act on the marketplace of Lesser Kitezh, are absent. The folkloristic stock characters of a bear leader and an old *gusli*-player are not utilized. Rather, the singer that performs the part of the bear leader does not do his tricks with an actual bear. He sings the song merely as a game, to which Grishka responds with his own tricks, one more blasphemous than the other. The blind *gusli*-player performs his song with the accompaniment of guitar, like a modern protest singer who warns his audience for impending danger. Furthermore, there is no historical reference in the portrayal of the Tatars,. They act as contemporary terrorists or gang members. Two elderly women in plain overcoats replace the mythic birds Sirin and Alkonost.

The setting of the opera is also freed from specifically Russian references. Both Lesser and Greater Kitezh are replaced by prosaic, unspecified halls. Only the wilderness in which Fevroniya resides could be associated with a Russian landscape, but the type of landscape is universal enough, with its beautiful reed filled land on the banks of a lake.

Tcherniakov drives his secularized interpretation of the story home in the scene of Greater Kitezh. There he demonstrates that the dreams of salvation nourished by the followers of Prince Yuri are nothing more than a chimera. The most striking move in this interpretation is the replacement of the page that keeps watch on the tower with an

eccentric, visionary woman. She describes the scenes that the boy would see from the tower from her own imagination.

Tcherniakov casts the woman as the mother of the boy that guided the blinded Poyarok back to the hiding place. Revealingly, she does not participate in the communal acts of the group. When they try to calm their fears with ritualized communal prayer, she confesses her visions. She appears as either mad or, at least, eccentric.

The outcome of the scene is represented as a collective suicide. Everyone drinks from the poison that is handed out by Yuri. The orchestral interlude that follows the scene is turned into a depiction of the death struggle of the group.

The Tatars burst into the hiding place, but fail to see the dead crowd in the background. The dramatic climax of the scene is a delicate point in Tcherniakov's staging and is the most difficult to make convincing. In the original staging, Grishka discovers that the city has disappeared. His cries of alarm awaken the Tatars. When they see the vanished city's reflection in the water for themselves, they take fright and flee. In Tcherniakov's version, they are chased away by the horror of their discovery of the dead group, who sit at the back of the room as frozen corpses. The Tatars are terrified by this bleak confrontation with death. The point is delicate, because in previous scenes, the Tatars had never been impressed by death. They commonly saw people killed or mistreated. They had placed themselves above morals and fear. That a group of dead people could scare them out of their wits is rather unbelievable. However, the dramatic closure of the scene and the accompanying music contribute to make the ending convincing.

The ultimate challenge posed by Rimsky-Korsakov's opera is to find a solution for the eschatological finale. Tcherniakov responded with an inspired move: he changed the symmetry of the structure. Belsky and Rimsky-Korsakov mirrored two previous scenes in the final act. Act four starts in the forest, which is a darker, more threatening parallel to the benign landscape of the first act. The *Verwandlung* takes Fevroniya to the transformed city, which forms a parallel with the first scene of the third act. The wedding song in the celestial city harks back to the song that was formerly heard in the second act, when the citizens of Lesser Kitezh greeted Fevroniya as a bride. The parallelism between the two scenes in nature and the two portrayals of Greater Kitezh lies at the heart of the work's symbolic message. Earthly life is transformed into its heavenly counterpart.

Tcherniakov subtly changes the symmetry. The original opera is cyclical with a return to the first act's natural setting in the first scene of Act IV. The cyclical structure is broken, however, and gives way to the symmetry between the two Greater Kitezh scenes. The cylical nature of life is transcended by its eschatological goal. Tcherniakov cancels the transcendental ending and brings the imagery of the finale definitively back to the opera's starting point. The story line of Greater Kitezh breaks up after Act III/1. The end of Prince Yuri's community is definitive. The scenery of Act III/1 is not repeated. The invisible city is not represented on stage. Instead, Tcherniakov brings the structure full circle with an ending that returns to the setting of the first act. Fevroniya dies with the remembrance of how she had lived.

Fevroniya is left alone in the woods at night. She is about to die from exhaustion. The three characters that she took care of in the first act reappear, accompanied by two elderly women. They nurse Fevroniya and put her to rest on a sledge. The hut of the first act reappears. The five characters move the sledge to the hut. Vsevolod enters the hut from behind. The woman who sings the part of the bird Sirin announces great joy. Fevroniya and Vsevolod express their love. Together, they eat bread, a reference to the Eucharist. Fevroniya gives the crumbles to the birds. The Eucharistic scene sets the hut in motion. The walls break open. The darkness disappears. The scene is covered in a bluish light. Fevroniya rejoices at the sight of this perfect serenity.
The wedding song is sung by the off stage chorus and brings the scenery of the first act back. Fevoniya is seated at the table around which she has invited her guests. She is joined by the characters already present on stage and by the main characters from the Greater Kitezh scene: Prince Yuri, the visionary woman and Fyodor Poyarok. Fevroniya asks them if all this could be real. They confirm it. Together, they share a happy moment, eat together and sing songs about eternal bliss. Fevroniya then thinks of Grishka and dictates her letter to Poyarok. During the letter scene, the light gradually dims. When her last act of charity is completed, Fevroniya returns to the foot of the tree where she was about to die. The scene darkens further, leaving her alone in solitude. She sings her final words about going to the cathedral on her wedding day and collapses. She dies while the off stage chorus sings of eternal joy. The scene darkens completely, leaving only the hut visible. After the ultimate chord has died away, the lamp in the hut goes out with a flicker, as a visual parallel to Fevroniya's last breath.

Tcherniakov explains the scene as a recollection of Fevroniya before the moment of her death of all the people she loved, the ones she was able to help, and the ones she could not help. Through the beautiful handling of the lighting, Tcherniakov drives home the point that this extensive scene occurs in Fevroniya's imagination in only a fraction of a second.

Tcherniakov's production of *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya* is a meaningful addition to the contemporary reception of Russian symbolism. With its thoroughly secularized reading, the production updates the work's spiritual message for a new age. It escapes the outdated dualism between spirit and matter on which much symbolist art was based. Spirituality is represented as inherent to human psychology. The production locates spiritual experiences within the whole range of possible human reactions to the dilemmas of existence. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the opera was easily turned into a symbol of the country's orthodox renewal. Tcherniakov did not leave it at that. He took the opera's symbolism even further towards a universalizing parable on human psychology and ethical choice.

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[1] Sidney Monas, "The Twilit Middle Class of Nineteenth-Century Russia," in: Edith W. Clowes e.a. (eds.), *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): 35.
[2] Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 118.
[3] The results of this policy are impressively documented in: Pierre Audi e.a. (eds.), *Si può? 50 Years Dutch National Opera* (Rotterdam: nai010, 2015). The policy is explained and discussed in: Francis Maes, Piet De Volder (eds.), *Opera: achter de schermen van de emotie* (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2011): 270-279.
[4] Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* (De Nederlandse Opera, Opus Arte: 2014). DVD OA 1089 D.
[5] Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*: 171.
[6] Claude Debussy, "Deux lettres de Debussy à Ernest Chausson," *La Revue musicale,* 7:7 (1 May 1926): 103.
[7] Letter of 29 April 1904, quoted in: Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*: 141.
[8] The point is taken in Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism from Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 141.
[9] Marina Frolova-Walker, *Ibidem*: 217.
[10] DVD OA 1089 D: DVD 1, track 2.
[11] DVD OA 1089 D: DVD 1, track 10.

[12] Tcherniakov's synopsis is reprinted in Dutch in the stage bill of the Amsterdam production, or in the liner notes to the DVD recording. For the stage bill: Nikolaj Rimski-Korsakov, *De legende van de onzichtbare stad Kitesj en het meisje Fevronja* (Amsterdam, De Nederlandse Opera, 2012): 55-57.

Act I: Fevroniya with Prince Vsevolod and her guests
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Act IV: Fevroniya with the ghost of Vsevolod, Sirin and Alkonost and her guests
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